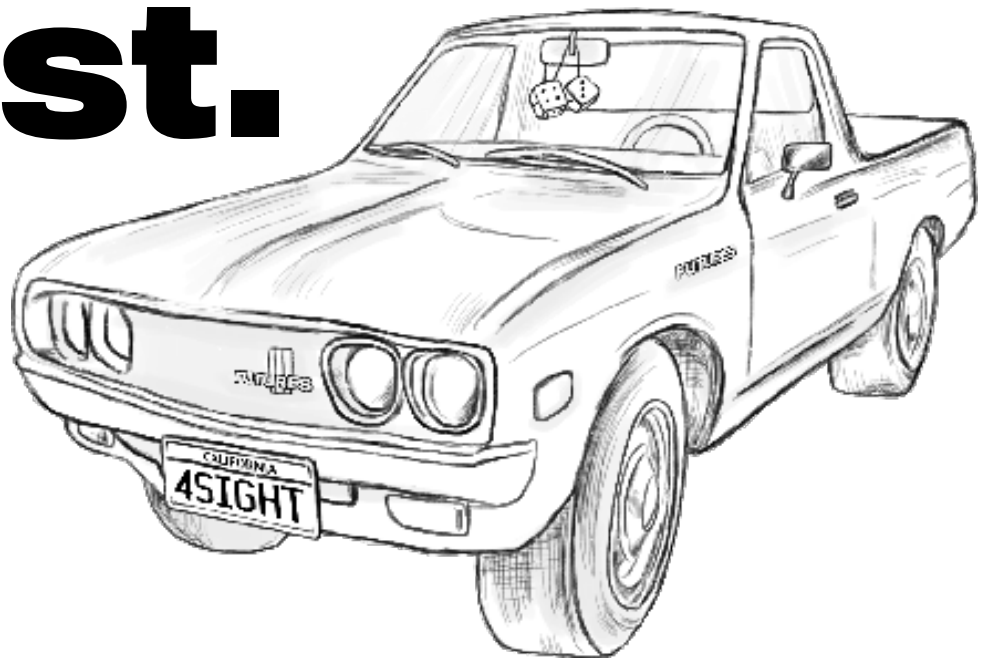Part 01

The Future Does Not Exist.

Talk transcript, and accompanying activities, originally performed by Matthew Manos at the first-ever **Apple Distinguished Schools Virtual Global Meeting** in July, 2020.

verynice.

The Future Does Not Exist.

The future does not exist. I want you to think about this statement for a second.
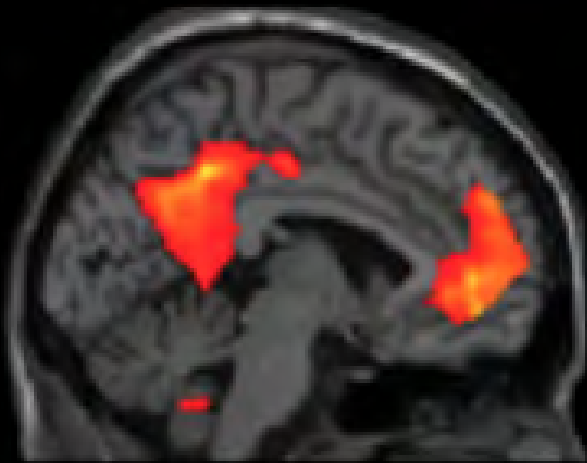
The future does not exist.

I teach a class on design strategy at the University of Southern California. In one of the sessions, I shared this phrase with my class. About half of the class went on to face an existential crisis, and the other asked this:

Wait a minute... the future does not exist? This is probably the same question that is running through your mind right now, so let me explain myself.
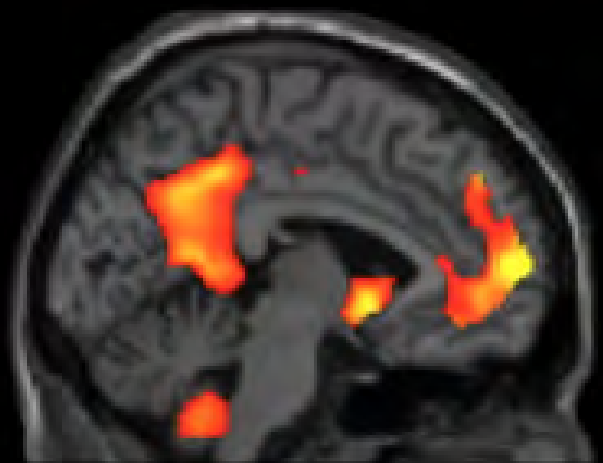
If you think about it, we can only ever be in the present. As a result, the future is just a symbol for the repercussions of our daily actions. This is actually quite an empowering sentiment when you really think about it. It means that the future is in our hands. It means the future is up to us to design. It means we can start creating the future we want to inhabit, today.

A very renowned futurist from the University of Hawaii, Jim Dator, says: "Any useful statement about the future must at first seem ridiculous." I love this quote, because it serves as a reminder that the future can not be predicted. Instead, there are many possible futures out there. To best prepare ourselves, we must think creatively and differently. In doing so, we will not be blindsided by the future. Futures thinking may be one of the most important skills to cultivate of our time. So, why don't we have futures class in school?

Elaboration of past and future events
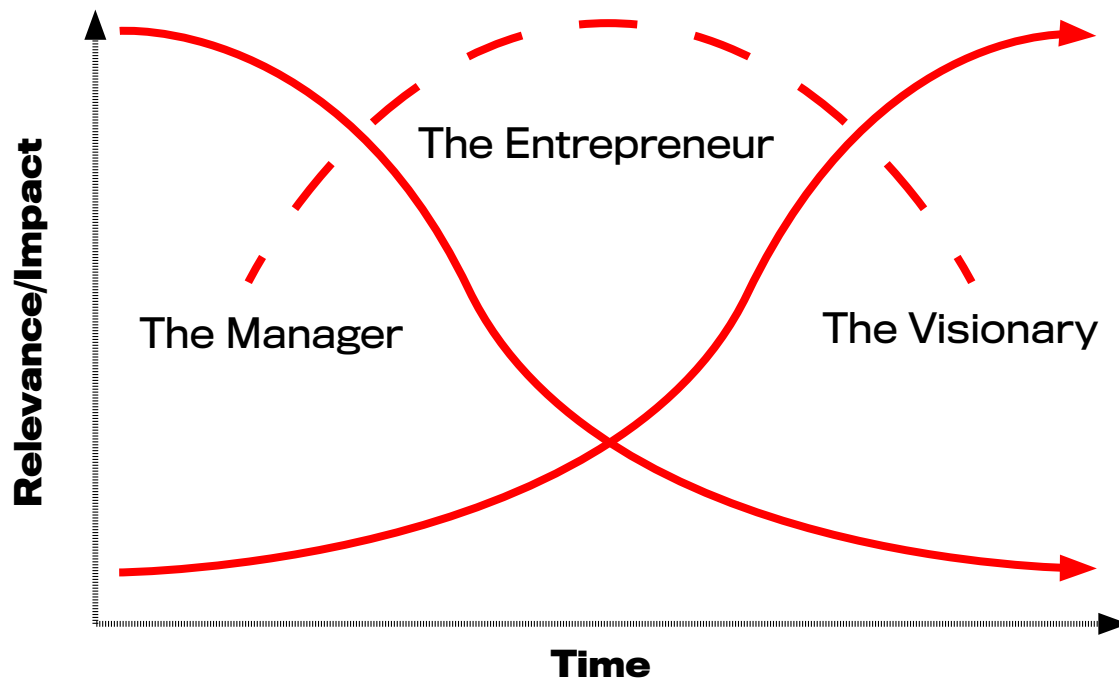

The Past   The Future

My colleague, Jake Dunagan, often shares this diagram. If you look at this brain scan, it turns out the parts of our brain that recall past events are the same parts that elaborate upon future events. We know how to think about the future. We just aren't trained to do it.

Schacter D L, Addis D R Phill, Trans. R. Soc. B 2007;362:773-788

There are three critical roles to play in future building: the manager, the entrepreneur, and the visionary.

The manager is responsible for understanding the current assets and resources of an organization or school, and maximizing their relevance and impact over time. **The visionary** is responsible for imagining new directions to move toward as well as big creative ideas. These are the Steve Jobs of the world. **The entrepreneur** is responsible for building a bridge between the current state, and those big ideas on the horizon by creating something new that is relevant and relatable.

All three of these roles work in concert, and in collaboration, with one another to make the future happen. Without **the manager**, we would see all of our existing resources and assets go to waste. Without **the visionary**, we would have no exciting new paths to move toward and work toward. Without **the entrepreneur**, we would lack the context for these big new ideas to our current way of life and work.

If we only **manage**, we would slowly be left with depleted resources that are out of date and overwhelmed. If we only **envision**, we would have a bunch of fun ideas, but with no grounding in reality in order to resonate with the intended audience. If we only **enterprise**, we would be stuck in a reactionary development cycle of new products and services that get us nowhere.
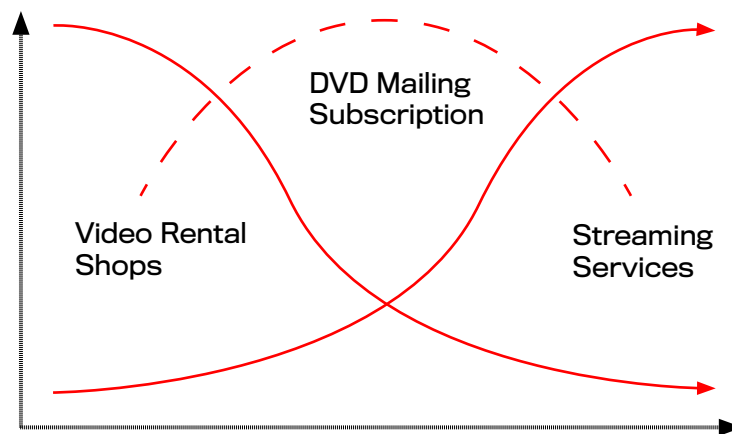
Take for example, video rental shops. They were huge in the '90s. For my family, it was a bit of a ritual. We'd get in the car, hope to find a good parking spot at the local strip mall, pick up some pizza, and grab a movie to rent for the weekend. These video rental shops slowly lost relevance over time, and they are now few and far between.

Streaming services emerged slowly at first, and then quickly dominated the space with their ability have us sit on our couch, grab a remote, and effectively access any movie or TV show we'd like. But what came in-between these two things? Jumping straight from brick and mortar to streaming would have been too much too fast.

This is why some streaming companies and new age video rental services first emerged as a DVD mailing subscription service. It was something similar to the feeling of a video rental store, but more convenient, like streaming.

Let's look at some more examples…

When you think about the way in which we communicate with one another there has been a long line, so to speak, of transitions. At some point after the land-line telephone, but before mobile phones, we had pagers. After physical mail, but before text messaging, we had email. After text messaging, but before live streaming, we had social media feeds.

Let's look at one more…

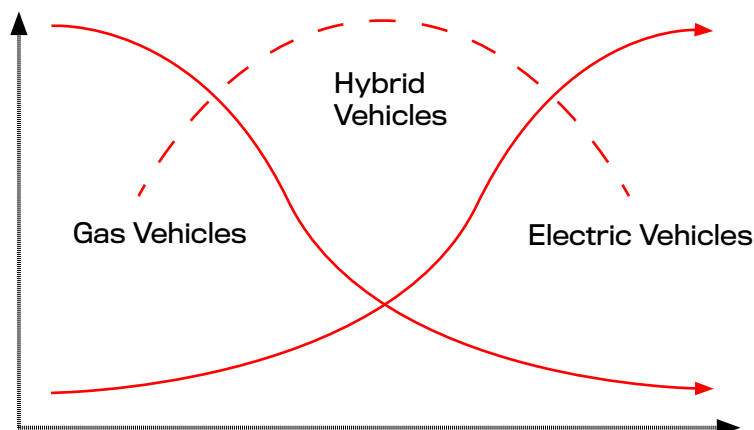The ways in which we learn have also evolved greatly over time. After textbooks, we see multi-touch books like the many offered on the iPad. But before this was possible, we saw the early e-readers and e-books. After the traditional row-seat physical classroom design, we see online learning. But in-between these two things we see experimental design interventions within classroom spaces and hybrid learning.

Transitions like these are not just natural and evolutionary... they are critical to the success of new ideas. In the design field, we call this skeuomorphism. According to the dictionary, a skeuomorph is a derivative object that retains nonfunctional ornamental design cues from structures that were inherent to the original.

Here's a great example of skeuomorphism. The iPhone's calculator app is very much inspired by the design of physical calculators. This provides us with a sense of comfort and familiarity, even though what we're holding in our hands is actually drastically different.

If we applied that idea to the diagram we were just looking at, the most obvious example would be hybrid vehicles. These vehicles are a literal "hybrid", therefore serving as that necessary bridge between our current and future realities. When some of the earliest electric vehicles attempted to launch too early, they quickly failed, proving the importance of these transitional phases.

Let's try this together.

Below, you will find two lists. One has **six signals of change**, and the other has **six current conditions**. Using a six-sided die (or other means of random selection), roll one item from each of these lists. *Circle, underline, or otherwise note your selection.*

Signals of Change

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. 3D Printed Buildings
3. Work-from-Home
4. Fear of Crowded Spaces
5. Climate Change
6. Internet of Things

Current Condition

1. Classroom Space
2. Books and Materials
3. Project-Based Learning
4. Physical Education
5. Lunch-Time
6. History Class

Now, in the blank space below, brainstorm a solution. You can write down a sentence or two, or draw something. Set a timer for **two minutes**, and... go!

Let's try this again!

This time, you're going to roll two items from each list. Using a six-sided die (or other means of random selection), roll two items from each of these lists. *Circle, underline, or otherwise note your selection.*
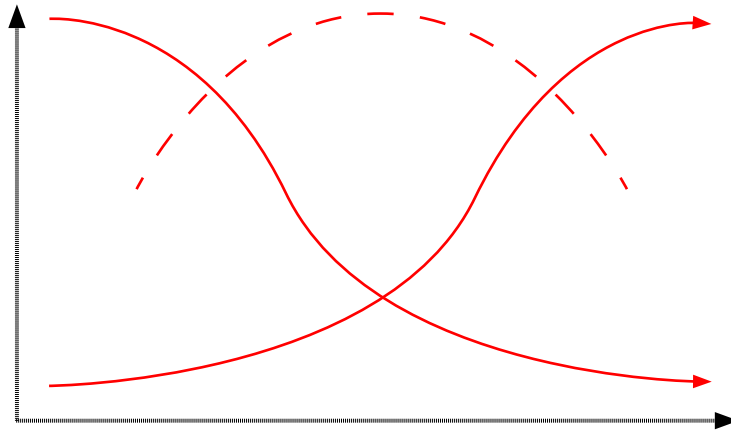
Signals of Change

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Current Condition

1. Classroom Space
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4. Physical Education
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Now, in the blank space below, brainstorm a solution. You can write down a sentence or two, or draw something. Set a timer for **three minutes**, and... go!

When we think about this diagram that we've been referencing throughout the presentation, I have to admit, it can be a bit misleading, due to it looking like such a single, linear path. In reality, the futures aren't that simple.

Now, you might be noticing that throughout this presentation I have been referring to the "future" as "futures". This is because there are actually multiple futures... more than we can even imagine.

This is why the futurist Jim Dator, who I mentioned earlier, created the alternative futures methodology. This methodology attempts to categorize all of the possible futures into four realities. One of **growth**, one of **collapse**, one of **constraint**, and one of **transformation**.

1. **Growth:** A future in which our current work or way of life continues to increase. Growth is the standard future vision for many companies (the chart with the arrows pointing up!), but growth is not always a positive thing (for example, growth of plastic waste).

2. **Collapse:** A future in which growth is reversed due to a harsh economic environment, tragic event, or change in consumer mindset.

3. **Constraint:** A future in which innovation and growth is intentionally constrained. For example, China's former one child policy.

4. **Transformation:** A future in which our systems or ways of life are fundamentally changed. For example, moving from an agricultural society to an industrial one. The launch of the iPhone changing "overnight" the ways in which we communicate with each other.

As an example, we'll take the trend of online education and run it through each of these.

1. **Growth:** A growth in online education could lead to more affordability and accessibility for education, but could also leave behind those without stable access to internet or a reliable space to work and learn.

2. **Collapse:** If online education does grow, and more affordable options exist, traditional learning institutions and the people employed by them could be severely impacted by a mass exodus of students.

3. **Constraint:** Screen fatigue and more time seated indoors in isolation could lead to a severe spike in mental health issues, resulting in a constrained allotment of time to learn in an online setting.

4. **Transformation:** The growth of online education leads to a completely new way of thinking about learning, assessment, and the relationships between school and life. New technologies emerge that we can't even imagine!

Let's try this together.

Below, I've brought back the same list of six signals of change from before. Roll the dice (or use another means of random selection) to determine which signal you will explore further.

Signals of Change

1. Artificial Intelligence

2. 3D Printed Buildings

3. Work-from-Home

4. Fear of Crowded Spaces

5. Climate Change

6. Internet of Things

Now, use the worksheet on the next page to imagine four different futures for this signal of change. You can summarize each future in just a sentence or two, or draw a picture. Set a timer for just 4 minutes, and.... go!

Growth	Collapse

Constraint	Transformation

Something that I hope you bring home with you after this talk is the call to **think plural.** With a futurist mindset, your job is to have all of the information you need in order to imagine the future you prefer, and everything in-between.

We can all play a role in designing the future we want to inhabit.

As an **entrepreneur**, your role is to empathize with the current situation and resources and connect those dots to the big ideas out there. As a **visionary**, your role is to understand the signals of change, emerging issues, and trends, and what those might mean for the future we want to create. As a **manager**, your role is to ensure the current way of being can be prepared to transition.

You might have noticed that I did not give examples for what roles in your organization might fit the most neatly into each of these categories. That's because I have one more twist for you.

You can be all three. On some days you need to manage. On some you have the time and space to envision. And on others, you're working with colleagues to connect those dots.

If the future does not exist... then the future is up to us to create.

As you think big, don't forget that the future starts with what we choose to do right now. Now, I want to close on an important note: I know that talking about the future can seem like an incredibly privileged thing to be doing. Especially in a time of great crisis like the one we are facing. I know for me like many of you - to say the least - this has been an interesting year.

Students are stressed, they're worried about their families. We're stressed. We're worried about our safety and our loved ones. And alongside all of this, we're working over time to ensure the incredible education our students deserve is possible no matter the proximity. It's a lot right now.

But remember this... **we can't give up on the future**.

To do so would be to allow the future to happen to us.

Instead, I want YOU to happen TO the future.

Thank you.